

Message Text

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E.O. 11652: XGDS-2
SECRET

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TAGS: EG, IS, PINR

SUBJECT: INTSUM 501 - FEBRUARY 14, 1978

LONDON FOR KINSOLVING
PARIS FOR NICHOLAS MURPHY
OTHER ADDRESSEES FOR CHIEFS OF MISSION

1. EMBASSY TEL AVIV NOTED THAT COMMENTARY AND REPORTS
ON US-ISRAELI RELATIONS CONTINUED TO DOMINATE THE ISRAELI

PRESS YESTERDAY, WITH ALMOST UNANIMOUS DISAPPROVAL OF WHAT IS PERCEIVED AS A CHANGE IN THE US POSITION. MEANWHILE, AN OFFICIAL OF THE SETTLEMENT GROUP ASSOCIATED WITH THE NRP SAID THAT HE OPPOSES EVACUATION OF THE RAFAH APPROACHES ON SECURITY GROUNDS; IF IT WERE THE PRICE OF "REAL PEACE," HOWEVER, THEN THE SETTLEMENT GROUPS COULD LIVE WITH IT. ON THE OTHER HAND, IT WOULD BE UNTHINKABLE FOR ISRAEL TO GIVE UP SUCH WEST BANK SETTLEMENTS AS THE ETZION BLOC SOUTH OF JERUSALEM.

2. OUR CONSULATE GENERAL IN JERUSALEM, MEANWHILE, REPORTS THAT THE ISRAELIS ARE CONSIDERING OPENING A NEW GATE IN THE OLD CITY'S 16TH CENTURY WALLS IN ORDER TO PROVIDE MORE

DIRECT VEHICLE ACCESS TO THE JEWISH QUARTER. ANY MAJOR ALTERATION IN CITY WALLS ERECTED BY SULAIMAN THE MAGNIFICENT IN 1541 WILL UNDOUBTEDLY PROVOKE AN INTERNATIONAL CONTROVERSY OVER CONTINUING UNILATERAL ISRAELI ALTERATION OF THE OLD CITY. (LIMITED OFFICIAL USE)

3. SYRIA. ASSAD'S ABILITY TO CAPITALIZE ON HIS
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ELECTORAL VICTORY LAST WEEK TO STRENGTHEN HIS POWER BASE MAY BE COMPLICATED BY RENEWED INSTABILITY IN LEBANON. THE OUTBURST OF ANTI-SYRIAN SENTIMENT BY THE LEBANESE IS PARTICULARLY DISCONCERTING TO THE MILITARY AND THE BAATH PARTY, TWO CONSTITUENCIES ASSAD HAS ENCOURAGED TO DEVELOP A STAKE IN RECONSTRUCTING LEBANON. THEY ARE ALSO THE TWO KEY CONSTITUENCIES WHICH WILL INFLUENCE HIS RESPONSIVENESS TO THE NEGOTIATING PROCESS.

4. ACCORDINGLY, ASSAD HAS STEPPED UP HIS CAMPAIGN TO INCREASE HIS LEVERAGE OVER THE BAATH PARTY AND THE MILITARY, AMONG OTHER MOVES, BY USING THE FEBRUARY 8 VOTING TO SHOW THAT HE ENJOYS WIDESPREAD POPULAR SUPPORT. HE HAS THUS DEMONSTRATED THAT HIS CONSTITUENCY EXTENDS CONSIDERABLY BEYOND THE CONFINES OF PARTY MEMBERSHIP. CONSEQUENTLY, HE MAY CONTEMPLATE REORGANIZING THE PARTY, AN EFFORT MANY SYRIANS HAVE BEEN EXPECTING SINCE LAST SUMMER.

5. THE ANNOUNCED ELECTION RESULTS ON THEIR FACE AMOUNT TO AN IMPRESSIVE SHOW OF SUPPORT FOR ASSAD. ACCORDING TO OFFICIAL FIGURES, 97 PERCENT OF THE ELIGIBLE VOTERS PARTICIPATED IN THE REFERENDUM. WHILE EMBASSY DAMASCUS NOTED THAT THE TURNOUT DID NOT APPROACH THE LEVEL CLAIMED BY THE AUTHORITIES AND THAT EDUCATED DAMASCENES HAD SCOFFED AT THE 99 PERCENT APPROVAL RATING FOR ASSAD, POPULAR PARTICIPATION IN THE PROCESS APPEARED SUFFICIENT FOR HIS PURPOSES.

6. HOWEVER, BEFORE INITIATING A HOUSECLEANING WITHIN THE BAATH, ASSAD MUST FIRST DEAL WITH ELEMENTS WITHIN THE OFFICER CORPS WHO HAVE NOT BEEN FULLY RESPONSIVE TO HIS DIRECTION. HE HAS REPORTEDLY ALREADY BEGUN TO REASSERT HIS DOMINATION OF THE MILITARY BY SHIFTING SENIOR OFFICERS.

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7. THE QUESTION MANY SYRIANS SEEM TO BE ASKING IS WHAT ASSAD WILL DO WITH HIS RENEWED MANDATE. UNLESS HE BECOMES PREOCCUPIED AGAIN WITH EVENTS IN LEBANON, WE BELIEVE THAT HE WILL PROBABLY USE THE ELECTION TO REINFORCE HIS CREDENTIALS AS THE ARCHITECT OF SYRIA'S PRESENT STRATEGY TOWARDS PEACE EFFORTS. BY FRAMING THE REFERENDUM IN THE CONTEXT OF OPPOSITION TO SADAT'S "UNSUCCESSFUL" STRATEGY, ASSAD HAS SIGNALLED HIS PRESENT DISINCLINATION TO REENGAGE IN THE PEACE PROCESS.

8. ON THE OTHER HAND, BY REPLENISHING HIS DOMESTIC POLITICAL CAPITAL, ASSAD IS POSITIONING HIMSELF TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF FUTURE POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE NEGOTIATIONS. IT IS UNCLEAR AS YET WHETHER EVENTS IN LEBANON WILL DISRUPT ASSAD'S EFFORTS TO ENHANCE HIS DOMESTIC MANEUVERABILITY. DESPITE PESSIMISM ABOUT THE COURSE OF EGYPTIAN DIPLOMACY, ASSAD APPEARS WILLING TO MAINTAIN THE OPTION TO REJOIN PEACE NEGOTIATIONS WHEN HE JUDGES THAT THEY WOULD SERVE SYRIAN INTERESTS. (SECRET) VANCE

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